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How Disgust Builds Social Bonds

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Though disgust is linked to a strong distancing reaction, we find that shared feelings of disgust can build social connections between consumers. In four studies, we show that although disgusted consumers do not seek affiliation with others, shared feelings of disgust lead to increased feelings of similarity and closeness nonetheless.

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The Surprising Upsides of Negativity

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Paper #1: The Surprising Effectiveness of the Hostile Mediator

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Paper #2: How Disgust Builds Social Bonds

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Paper #3: Negative Moods Spur Effortful Attainment: A Mood Improvement Strategy

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Paper #4: Growing Up Poor Improves Specific Mental Ability

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Is bad always stronger than good? While abundant evidence suggests that ugly social interactions, negative emotions, and disruptive childhood environments often have negative impact on consumers' behaviors and well-being, four papers in this session provide novel hypotheses and surprising empirical evidence that demonstrates the upsides of negativity. This session looks at both interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of negativity, and directly fits the theme of getting back to the fun in research (a call that responds to the prior years' negativity and volatility) – hence, a push for more upsides to our collective negativity. We explore two questions: 1) how negative emotion impacts interpersonal relationships, and 2) how negative affect and environment influence consumer goal pursuit and intrapersonal performance.

The first two papers examine how negativity, especially negative emotions, influence consumers' behaviors in an interpersonal context. *Zhang, Gino and Norton* demonstrate the surprising effectiveness of hostile mediators in resolving conflict such as they may serve as a point of comparison and decrease the division between the two negotiating parties. Across six studies, they show that negotiators who interact with hostile mediators are more willing to reach an agreement compared to those who interact with either neutral or nice mediators. The second paper by *Wu, Morales, Fitzsimons, and Chartrand* show that although disgust is often a strong distancing reaction, shared feelings of disgust surprisingly create social connection between consumers. Four studies demonstrate that when consumers experience the feeling of disgust together, they report increased feelings of similarity and closeness with group members.

The final two papers investigate how negativity can influence consumer behaviors from the intrapersonal perspective. *Wang and Vohs* test the novel consequences of negative affect on goal pursuit. Through four experiments, they show that negative emotions can lead to effortful goal pursuit because consumers implicitly recognize that their efforts could product mood improvement. Finally, *Griskevicius et al.* challenge the axiom that growing up in a poor environment is necessarily all bad. Three experiments demonstrate that poverty in

childhood doesn't not impair all styles mental function – and in fact can enhance the ability to shift between tasks flexibly and efficiently.

In sum, this session demonstrates novel and counterintuitive findings showing that the negative aspect of the life, such as bad experiences with product, interacting with a mean person, bad mood, and even poverty-stricken childhood environments, can lead to surprisingly positive outcomes. This session will appeal to a broad set of scholars interested in emotions, interpersonal relationships, consumer goal pursuit and well-being.

The Surprising Effectiveness of the Hostile Mediator

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When negative emotions build as negotiations approach an impasse, parties in dispute commonly turn to a mediator to encourage amicable behavior and facilitate agreements. Both common sense and conflict resolution guidebooks suggest mediators should treat such situations with a gentle approach in order to mitigate negative emotions. Indeed, establishing rapport is considered a “best practice” in facilitating conflict resolution (Beardsley et al. 2006; Susskind et al. 1999). We demonstrate that while such “killing them with kindness” strategies are intuitively appealing, they can be misguided.

Mediation of disagreements is an interesting case where the documented benefits of positive emotions (Kopelman, Rosette, and Thompson 2006) and costs of negative emotions (Lelieveld et al. 2012) may reverse. In mediated conflicts—in contrast to unmediated conflicts—the mediator's behavior serves as a point of reference for negotiators to make judgments about their counterpart's behavior. Based on research documenting contrast effects in social comparisons (Rafaeli and Sutton 1991), we suggest that added mediator hostility may decrease the division between the two negotiating parties by serving as a point of comparison. Negotiators might think, “My counterpart doesn't seem so bad compared to this mediator!” Across six studies, we show that negotiators who interact with hostile mediators are more willing to reach an agreement compared to those who interact with either neutral or nice mediators.

Study 1 shows that most people predict that hostile mediators would be less effective at helping negotiators resolve conflict than nice mediators, reflecting a lay belief in the wisdom of courtesy. Evidence from Studies 2 through 5, however, suggests that these predictions do not match actual outcomes. In Study 2, participants played the role of a disputant in a negotiation, and were exposed to an audio recording of either a mean, neutral, or nice mediator who summarized the main grievances of both negotiators. Compared to those who were exposed to either a neutral or nice mediator, negotiators exposed to a hostile mediator indicated they were more willing to reach an agreement and also expected their counterpart to be more willing to compromise. Additionally, ratings of the mediator's degree of hostility mediated the effect of the mediator's style on participants' willingness to reach settlement.

In Study 3, we explore the mechanism underlying our results, examining whether participants are more willing to negotiate with their counterparts because the counterpart appears more reasonable in contrast to the hostile mediator (contrast hypothesis) or because the hostile mediator serves as a common enemy against whom negotiators can unite (common enemy hypothesis). To distinguish between these two accounts, we manipulated the target of the me-

diator's comments. In some cases, the mediator was mean or nice to the negotiators themselves; in others, the mediator was mean or nice to an individual external to the negotiation. Adding hostility to the environment had a positive effect on negotiators' willingness to reach agreements regardless of the target, supporting the contrast hypothesis.

What are the types of contrast between the mediator and counterpart that explains our effect? Study 4a replicates findings from Study 2 and demonstrates that contrasts on the dimension of warmth—but not competence—drive our finding that hostile mediators increase willingness to reach agreement. Additionally, not all contrasts that portray the counterpart as warmer generate greater willingness to reach agreement. In Study 4b, we varied not only the hostility of the mediator, but also hostility of the counterpart. We found that relevance of the comparison matters: when counterparts are hostile, added mediator hostility decreases the extent to which counterparts appear more hostile relative to the mediator, thereby increasing willingness to resolve conflict. However, when counterparts are more reasonable, this contrast is not as meaningful in that counterparts have already demonstrated the capacity to negotiate without resorting to hostility.

Whereas findings in Studies 1-4 focus on mediator's *willingness* to reach agreement, Study 5 focuses on negotiators' *ability* to resolve conflict. Negotiating dyads were incentivized to maximize personal gain and were randomly assigned to interact with a mediator through an online platform. Mediators were participants trained to follow a script of either nice or hostile remarks directed toward both negotiators; mediators received payment based on the extent to which both counterparts rated them as either hostile or nice. To address the possibility that simply the desire to avoid interactions with the mediator explains our prior findings, negotiators in this experiment also interacted through a private chat after the mediation to discuss any unresolved issues before reaching a final conclusion. Our findings show that negotiators were more likely to reach agreement after interacting with a hostile mediator compared to a nice one. Hostile mediators did not appear to force negotiators to make agreements more quickly at the expense of sacrificing agreement quality, as agreements across the two conditions did not differ on the extent to which they were integrative. However, final agreements after interactions with the hostile mediator were less equitable. Taken together, the findings show that although hostile mediators help negotiators reach outcomes that are objectively better than their next best alternative, agreements reached after exposure to a hostile mediator may involve one negotiator making more concessions than the other.

As with parents who induce their children to cease bickering by causing them to unite against an even meaner figure – for example, a parent enforcing bedtimes – hostile mediators can also induce parties in dispute to increase rapport by setting a standard of incivility against which even the worst adversary seems civil.

How Disgust Builds Social Bonds

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Though feelings of disgust have been linked to a specific physiological state (nausea), a distinct facial expression (closed nostrils, open mouth), and a typical feeling state (revulsion), it is perhaps disgust's strong and immediate distancing reaction that is its hallmark (Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley, 2008). Indeed, research has consistently shown that feelings of disgust cause individuals to engage in distancing behaviors such as discarding existing possessions (Lerner, Small and Loewenstein, 2004), decreasing search behavior and

lowering willingness to try new products (Argo, Morales and Dahl, 2006).

The fact that disgust leads individuals to distance themselves suggests that feelings of disgust should impede the formation of social bonds; social bonds typically result, after all, from feelings of closeness and attachment. Consistent with this line of reasoning, feelings of disgust have been linked to lowered evaluations of both disgust-eliciting and nearby objects (Lerner, Small and Loewenstein; Morales and Fitzsimons, 2007), suggesting that disgust may lead to lowered evaluations of others.

Research suggests, however, that emotions can lead to heightened feelings of social connection even when those emotions are negative. For instance, individuals preparing to experience a fear-provoking event prefer to wait in the company of others also about to experience the event (Schachter 1959), and individuals who experience the negative emotions of a natural disaster together express increased feelings of solidarity and group cohesion (Tyhurst 1951). These results suggest that positivity is not necessarily an essential ingredient in creating social bonds.

In the current research, we draw on research on disgust, emotion and social connection to suggest that although disgust typically leads to lowered evaluations of associated objects, it can also lead to increased feelings of social connection when feelings of disgust are shared. Specifically, we suggest that increased feelings of social bonding are most likely to occur when the feelings arise from a disgust-eliciting event that individuals experience together.

In study 1, groups of participants were randomly assigned to watch either a disgusting, scary, happy, sad or emotionally neutral film clip together. After watching the film clip, participants were asked to evaluate the clip and to indicate how socially connected they felt to other members of the group. Results revealed that relative to participants in other conditions, participants in the disgust condition had less favorable evaluations of both the film clip they watched and of the other participants in their lab session. However, relative to the control and sadness conditions, participants in the disgust condition (along with those in the fear and happiness conditions) reported increased feelings of similarity and closeness between group members, and increased feelings of being connected and bonded.

In study 2, participants were primed with disgust, fear, sadness, happiness or control (neutral) before indicating whether they would prefer to watch an upcoming film clip alone or with other participants. The emotional content of the film clip was matched to condition (e.g., disgust condition participants watched a disgusting clip, fear participants watched a scary clip). Participants then watched the film clip together as a group, evaluated it, and indicated how socially connected they felt to other group members. Consistent with study 1 results, participants in the disgust condition reported less favorable evaluations of both the film clip and other participants in their lab session but increased feelings of similarity and closeness, and of being connected and bonded. In contrast to those in the fear and happiness conditions, however, participants in the disgust condition expressed a higher preference for watching the film clip alone rather than with others. This suggests that although feelings of shared disgust can result in increased feelings of social connection, disgusted individuals do not seek out such connections.

In study 3, we focus on examining the conditions under which disgust leads to social connections. This study was a 2 (jellybean flavor) by 3 (consumption setting) between-subjects design. Participants took part in a jellybean taste test where they were randomly assigned to evaluate either a peach (neutral condition) or vomit-flavored jellybean (disgust condition) before completing measures of social connection. Participants were assigned to complete the taste

test in one of three settings: 1) all participants in the session were told together what jellybean flavor they would be tasting and then tasted the jellybean together 2) all session participants were told together what jellybean flavor they would be tasting but then tasted it separately and 3) each session participant was told individually what jellybean flavor he would be tasting and then tasted the jellybean alone. Results revealed that relative to the peach (neutral) condition, participants who tasted vomit jellybeans had lower evaluations of both the jellybean and the other session participants. Interestingly, tasting vomit jellybeans led to increased feelings of similarity and closeness only when the jellybeans were eaten together.

In study 4, we examine whether disgust has to be integral to the consumption in order to elicit the disgust bonding effect. This study was a 2 (prime) by 2 (jellybean flavor) by 2 (consumption setting) between-subjects design. Participants first viewed a series of ads that were designed to prime disgust or neutral emotion. They then tasted either a peach or vomit-flavored jellybean in either a group setting (where everyone tasted the same flavor) or alone. Results replicated those of study 3 in that participants who tasted vomit jellybeans had lower evaluations of both the jellybeans and other participants relative to those in the peach (neutral) condition. Also consistent with study 3, tasting vomit-flavored jellybeans led to increased feelings of similarity and closeness only when the jellybean flavor was announced and eaten together. There was no effect of the prime, suggesting that disgust leads to feelings of social connection only when consumers are actively sharing a disgusting experience.

Together, these studies suggest that although disgust's distancing tendencies keep individuals from wanting to connect with others, positive feelings of social connection may arise anyway when consumers are engaging in a disgust-eliciting experience together.

Negative Moods Spur Goal Attainment: A Mood Improvement Strategy

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers engage in self-control behaviors to pursue multiple goals every day. How does different affect influence consumer's goal pursuit? The literature states that people seek to change a negative mood by preferring immediate gratification (e.g., overeating; impulse buying). A different literature shows that the top outcome of goal attainment is positive mood. The current research used the latter conclusion to challenge the former by predicting and finding that effortful goal attainment is a form of emotion regulation after negative affect. We proposed that consumers experiencing negative (vs. neutral) emotion exert more effort towards achieving goals because goal accomplishment can improve mood. Four experiments tested these hypotheses and found support.

Experiment 1 tested the prediction that participants who are in a negative (vs. neutral) affect state would exert more effort to achieve a goal. We tested both anger and sadness to test types of negative affect. Participants first read that performance on verbal tasks predicts academic and career success. After working on verbal puzzles for eight minutes, they were stopped and told that the experimenter needed to assess their work in order to prepare more puzzles. While the experimenter left ostensibly to assess their work and prepare ensuing puzzles, participants completed a task that served as the mood induction. Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of three film clips, known to induce anger, sadness, or a neutral state. After the film, participants were informed that they had finished 85% of the task and were handed the last puzzle, which would complete their task. The dependent variable was effort exerted during on the last puzzle, operationalized as the speediness with which they com-

pleted the task. Consistent with predictions, participants in the anger ($M=199.62$) and sadness conditions ($M_s=200.36$) were faster than the neutral condition $M=267.07$; both $ps<.01$). Anger and sadness conditions did not differ ($t<1$).

Experiment 2's aim was to provide evidence for the proposed mechanism of emotion regulation using a mood freezing manipulation (Manucia, Baumann, and Cialdini 1984). Participants were randomly assigned to condition in a 3 (anger vs. sadness vs. neutral) by 2 (mood-freezing vs. non-mood-freezing) between-subjects design. The mood-freezing manipulation tested whether participants experiencing negative (vs. neutral) emotions would exert effort to achieve a goal even when they believed that such efforts would not change their mood. We predicted that improved goal attainment would not hold for participants told that their mood could not change, but that we would replicate the pattern from experiment 1 among other participants. If so, this would support our proposed mechanism of (implicit) emotion regulation.

Similar to experiment 1, participants worked on word puzzles first and were stopped in order to take part in unrelated tasks that served as manipulations of mood as well as mood-freezing conditions. Next, participants went through the similar mood induction as in experiment 1. Next, as part of an ostensible marketing study on aromatherapy, all participants breathed in the scent of an essential oil. Those in the mood-freezing condition were told that the oil renders people's emotional states temporarily unchangeable. The other half were given no further information.

Next, participants worked on a last word puzzle and completed a second set of mood measures to check on the manipulation of the mood freezing manipulation.

Analyses indicated both the mood induction and mood-freezing manipulations were successful (reports available from the authors). Performance on the last puzzle conformed to predictions: As expected, among participants who did not receive the mood-freezing manipulation, those in the neutral condition took significantly longer to complete the last puzzle ($M=362.33$) than participants in the anger condition ($M=182.54$, $p<.01$), and sadness condition ($M=192.00$, $p<.01$). In support of the theory that those results are a sign of tacit mood regulation attempts, participants who received the mood-freezing manipulation did not differ according to condition on performance of the last task, $F<1$. Moreover, mediation results indicated that the combined mood induction and mood-freezing manipulations changed mood due to the effort that participants applied to achieve the goal.

Experiment 3 tested the hypothesis that fun tasks, to which people often turn in order to improve their mood, would be as effective in improving mood as effortful goal attainment – but only in the short-term; hedonic tasks would not be as effective in maintaining a boost in mood after an initial period. Participants were randomly assigned to condition in 2 (mood: negative vs. neutral) by 2 (task: challenging vs. fun) between-subjects design. After the mood induction, participants' mood was measured. Next, participants completed a challenging task (word puzzle) or a fun task (drawing and coloring), after which they completed a second affect report. After a neutral filler task, participants rated their affect again. Analyzing mood reports across measurement times, we found that while both hedonic and challenging effortful tasks improved mood in the short-run, boosts from the hedonic task do not endure, whereas the challenging task conferred longer-lasting positivity.

Experiments 1 to 3 showed that people exert effort to accomplish a challenging goal as a mean to lift their mood when in a negative state. These results raise the question of why people fail to rely on such tasks when the attainment of a challenging goal is so helpful

to mood recovery? Experiment 4 showed that when asked explicitly, people in a negative mood (induced) prefer hedonic tasks over a challenging ones – much like other work on the misprediction of future emotional states (e.g., Gilbert, 2006). In short, experiment 4 showed that people do not recognize the emotional benefits of attaining challenging goals.

In summary, people in negative, as opposed to neutral, emotional state exert more effort to conquer challenging and achievable goals. We demonstrated that this improved performance is due to efforts to improve their mood. Despite being better at achieving goals, people in a negative mood prefer that which is easy, hedonic, and short-lived over challenging and enduringly helpful tasks – an affective forecasting error.

Growing Up Poor Improves Specific Mental Abilities

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Can growing up poor improve certain mental abilities? Evidence thus far suggests the answer is no. People who grow up in resource-deprived environments tend to score lower on tests of intelligence, language, memory, and other abilities. This reduced performance is often taken to imply that early-life deprivation impairs all forms of mental functioning.

We depart from prior work by arguing that childhood adversity shapes consumer psychology in *adaptive ways*. We hypothesized that the minds of individuals reared in resource-deprived environments should be specialized to perform tasks that are most useful in such environments.

We propose that resource deprivation should have specific consequences for mental abilities later in life. *Inhibition* is the deliberate overriding of dominant responses. Consider wanting chocolate cake when one is on a diet. Being able to overcome that urge stems from inhibition. Inhibition is central to self-control, willpower, and self-regulation — all crucial forms of being a healthy consumer. What often has been neglected in consumer psychology, however, is the essential value of shifting abilities. *Shifting* refers to flexible switching between different tasks. Shifting is central to adapting to changing situations rapidly and efficiently. Consider the consumer who needs to juggle tasks related to being a parent, online shopper, and be productive in her home office. Being able to shift successfully enables her to maintain all three roles. Shifting is essential for success in modern life.

We hypothesize that exposure to stressful early-life environments should exert *specific and opposing* effects on inhibition and shifting. Given that stressful early-life environments shape the mind toward short-term opportunism (rather than long-term investment), such environments should diminish inhibition. By contrast, stressful early-life environments should enhance shifting. The ability to shift between tasks flexibly and efficiently is essential for adapting to constantly changing environments. Because opportunities in such environment are fleeting, consumers who can adapt to change, such as by rapidly identifying new patterns and associations, are in a better position to take advantage of new opportunities before they vanish.

The current research investigated the conditions under which adult consumers raised in resource-deprived versus resource-abundant environments shower superior and inferior executive function. We hypothesized that childhood adversity is most likely to influence adult performance when consumers are tested under duress. Three experiments compared the performance of adults reared in high-stress versus low-stress environments on two types of executive function: inhibition and shifting. Critically, the performances of

these two groups were compared in two different experimental contexts: stressful and non-stressful.

Inhibition was tested in Experiment 1, and shifting was tested in Experiments 2 and 3. All three studies had an experimental manipulation that induced stress in half of the participants before the executive function task. Each experiment also assessed individual differences in childhood resources. Experiments 1 and 2 involved college students, who retrospectively recalled the level of childhood resources. Experiment 3 was conducted with a diverse community sample of adults on whom we had detailed childhood environment data. This unique experiment allowed us to replicate the novel shifting finding using more objective measures of childhood environment. It also permitted us to determine which specific type of childhood stress leads people to excel at shifting.

Experiment 1. Fifty-seven consumers completed a standard executive function task assessing inhibition. First, psychological stress was elicited in half the participants by having them read a news article about worsening economic conditions. We predicted that individuals reared in resource-deprived relative to resource-abundant environments would perform worse at inhibition in the stressful context. Analyses revealed the predicted childhood resources by stressful experimental context interaction ($p = .041$). In the non-stressful experimental condition, there was no difference in performance among the two groups ($p = .79$). But in the stressful experimental condition consumers from resource-deprived childhoods performed significantly worse on the inhibition task than those from resource-abundant childhoods ($p = .003$).

Experiment 2. Experiment 2 tested whether resource-deprived childhoods can *improve* adult performance on a different executive function. Seventy-five people completed a standard executive function task assessing shifting. Analyses revealed the predicted childhood resources by stressful experimental context interaction ($p = .022$). In the non-stressful experimental condition, there was no difference in performance among the two groups ($p = .86$). But in the stressful experimental condition, individuals from resource-deprived childhoods performed significantly better at shifting than those who reported resource-abundant childhoods ($p = .035$).

Experiment 3. Experiment 3 sought to replicate the novel shifting finding from Experiment 2 with a diverse group of older participants on whom we had detailed childhood information. Fifty-one people (all age 37) performed the shifting task used in Experiment 2. Unlike Experiments 1 and 2, each participant's childhood environment in Experiment 3 had been rated by trained interviewers at multiple time-points between ages 0 and 10. This allowed us to pinpoint which environmental factor is linked to improved shifting ability.

Findings showed that superior shifting performance was directly related to growing up in an unpredictable environment. There was a childhood unpredictability by stressful experimental context interaction ($p = .038$). In the non-stressful experimental condition, there was no difference in performance among the two groups ($p = .89$). But in the stressful experimental condition, people who experienced unpredictable childhoods performed significantly better at shifting than those who experienced predictable childhoods ($p = .016$).

Can growing up in a stressful childhood environment improve certain mental abilities in adult consumers? The answer is yes—but only in stressful contexts. Three experiments revealed that consumers who had stressful childhoods were worse at inhibition, but better at shifting. Because opportunities in such environments are rapidly changing, those who can adapt to change rapidly are in a better position to take advantage of new opportunities before they disappear.

The current experiments are the first to document that stressful childhood environments do not universally impair mental function-

ing, but can actually improve specific mental abilities in adults in specific contexts.

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